

Synodality and the Francis Pontificate: A Fresh Reception of Vatican II

Theological Studies
2023, Vol. 84(1) 44–60
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DOI: 10.1177/00405639221147844
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



Richard R. Gaillardetz 

Boston College, USA

Abstract

The ten-year Francis pontificate represents a fresh reception of the Second Vatican Council. The full dimensions of this reception can be apprehended through the lens of synodality, the leitmotif of the Francis papacy. This article will consider four features of synodality exhibited in the papal magisterium of Pope Francis that help us appreciate the ways in which Francis has creatively received conciliar teaching and advanced the conciliar agenda.

Keywords

church authority, doctrine, ecclesiology, Pope Francis, missionary church, synodality, tenth anniversary

The tenth anniversary of the election of Pope Francis provides an opportune moment to assess this remarkable pontificate. This article will primarily attend to the pope's more ecclesiological contributions.¹

1. This article has its origin as a lecture the author gave in Rome on October 21, 2022, for the *Dies Academicus* of the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences. Apart from a few small revisions, the text remains the same as that given in the public lecture.

Corresponding author:

Richard R. Gaillardetz, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02467, USA.

Email: richard.gaillardetz@bc.edu

Although Francis is the first postconciliar pope not to have attended the council himself, his pontificate simply cannot be comprehended apart from the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, I will argue that his great gift to the church lies in his entirely fresh, relatively comprehensive, and coherent reception of the teaching of Vatican II.² And at the heart of that reception, serving as its unifying center, is the theme of synodality. Although the term was never employed directly by the council, there can be no doubt that the seeds of synodality draw their theological nutrients from the fertile soil of the council.

First, Pope Francis has explicitly linked synodality to the council's teaching on the church as the people of God. One of the most momentous decisions of the council regarded the decision to place the chapter on the people of God *before* the chapter on the hierarchy in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.³ This decision reflected the council's determination to prioritize Christian baptism over Holy Orders and highlight the common identity of all members in the church as *Christifideles*. Not surprisingly, Francis has himself admitted that the "image of the church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God."⁴

Second, Francis draws inspiration from the council's teaching on the church as pilgrim.⁵ The church does not hover above the vicissitudes of human history, as some *societas perfecta* ecclesiologies had suggested; rather, it labors daily on an earthly pilgrimage in which the church is inevitably influenced, for good or ill, by a range of historical forces. Insofar as the church is on a pilgrimage, it will achieve its perfection only at the consummation of history (*LG*, §48) and therefore will always be in need of reform and renewal.⁶ Francis has emphasized this conciliar teaching as well, noting that the church "is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary."⁷

2. See also Massimo Faggioli, "Pope Francis's Interpretation and Reception of Vatican II," in *Pope Francis: A Voice for Mercy, Justice, Love, and Care for the Earth*, ed. Barbara E. Wall and Massimo Faggioli (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 23–39.
3. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*). Rafael Luciani has emphasized the significance of this development as a hermeneutical key for comprehending Francis's reception of the council in *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 45–57. For more on synodality, see the International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (March 2, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html; and the special issue "Synodalities," ed. Michel Andraos, Thierry-Marie Courau, and Carlos Mendoza Álvarez, *Concilium* 2 (2021).
4. Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America* (September 30, 2013), <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.
5. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 67–69, 79–89.
6. *LG*, §48; *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), §6, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.
7. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §111, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited as *EG*).

Third, a synodal church will live out of the council's insight that the whole church is the recipient of God's Word. The church is not a self-contained institution with divine truth as its private possession. Rather, the council teaches us, particularly in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, that the church transcends itself in a posture of radical receptivity to God's self-disclosure.⁸ The whole Christian faithful are given a supernatural instinct for the faith (*sensus fidei*) that allows them to offer their own contributions to a "listening church" (*LG*, §12). In what was perhaps the most important speech of his pontificate, a speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the synod of bishops, Francis insisted that "a synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing."⁹

For Pope Francis, it is only by way of this fresh, comprehensive reception of the council's teaching that we may become a synodal church. In this article, I will consider four features of the pope's commitment to synodality: (1) a synodal church requires the transformation of ecclesial relations, (2) a synodal church must be missionary in nature, (3) a synodal church will concentrate on the essentials of the Christian faith, and (4) in a synodal church the authentic exercise of authority will be guided by the principle of subsidiarity.

A Synodal Church Requires Transformed Ecclesial Relationships

According to the Venezuelan theologian Rafael Luciani, synodality requires nothing less than "an integral, organic transformation of the whole church."¹⁰ All ecclesial relationships must be reconfigured in accord with the priority of our baptism. This commitment will inevitably challenge a vision of the church built around a rigid lay-clergy binary. In a 2016 letter to Cardinal Ouellet, the pope wrote:

Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we should always be proud, is Baptism. Through Baptism and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, (the faithful) "are

8. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

9. Francis, "Speech Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html. For a recent history of the *sensus fidei*, see John J. Burkhard, *The Sense of the Faith in History: Its Sources, Reception, and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022). For more on the fresh appropriation of this teaching in this pontificate, see the International Theological Commission, "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church" (June 10, 2014), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html; and Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

10. Luciani, *Synodality*, 74.

consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God.¹¹

Note that, for the pope, “laicity” is not a negative term, identifying the non-ordained; rather it identifies the fundamental status conferred upon us in baptism. All other relational configurations in the church must in some way point back to and serve the vocation of the baptized.

A failure to acknowledge the priority of baptism has led, Francis is convinced, to the evils of clericalism and a ubiquitous clerical culture. In his opening address to the synod on young people, he warned:

Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a *power* to be exercised rather than as a free and generous *service* to be given. This leads us to believe that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or learn anything, or that pretends to listen. *Clericalism is a perversion and is the root of many evils in the Church*: we must humbly ask forgiveness for this and above all create the conditions so that it is not repeated.¹²

He has persistently denounced the temptations to conceive ordained ministry in terms of power and privilege. The pope wishes to move our church away from a rigid lay-clergy binary and toward a more expansive and relational understanding of public ministry in the church. Such a transformation of ecclesial relationships will have a structural dimension. We must see the church as an “inverted pyramid,” he has argued, a church that places public ministry in service of God’s people.¹³

A careful review of this pontificate illuminates a consistent effort to give new institutional forms to his vision of a synodal church. In a relatively overlooked development, the pope has opened the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte to both men and women in his 2021 apostolic letter, *Spiritus Domini*.¹⁴ This was quickly followed

11. Francis, “Letter of Pope Francis to Cardinal Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America” (March 19, 2016), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html.
12. Francis, “Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” (October 3, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html (emphasis in original).
13. For further reflection on the implications of this image, see Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (June 2017): 299–325, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698561>.
14. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* (January 10, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html.

by his establishment of a new, instituted ministry of catechist in *Antiquum Ministerium*.¹⁵ To understand why these seemingly minor developments were significant, a little background is necessary.

In a laudable effort to dismantle the medieval *cursus honorum* that conceived holy orders as a series of hierarchical advances up the ecclesiastical ranks, in 1972 Pope Paul VI suppressed minor orders, and in his apostolic letter, *Ministeria Quaedam*, he created instead the installed ministries of lector and acolyte. These were formal ecclesial ministries subject to ritual installation and open to laymen (but not laywomen).¹⁶ Unfortunately, he continued to require that those pursuing ordained ministry first be installed as lector and acolyte. Thus, the medieval *cursus honorum*, which seemingly was being dismantled with the suppression of minor orders, was effectively restored by requiring prior installation to lector and acolyte for those pursuing ordination to the diaconate and presbyterate. Moreover, by limiting these installed ministries only to men, he also created a situation in which many local churches preferred to allow men and women to exercise both ministries on an informal basis, absent any ritual installation, rather than exclude laywomen.

By allowing both men and women to be formally installed as lector and acolyte, and creating the newly installed ministry of catechist, the pope has given a more formal status and ritual expression to a range of ministries open to the laity and, in doing so, has nudged the church away from a strict identification of public ministry with ordination. The pope envisions a church built up by a wide diversity of ministries, ordained and non-ordained. He has further relativized a strict lay-clergy binary by allowing non-ordained religious brothers to be appointed to positions of leadership, including those of provincial and even superior general, in communities that include priests.

A synodal, “listening church” requires structures and processes that can support meaningful ecclesial interaction marked by the free exchange of views and insights among all the Christian faithful. Toward that end, the pope has leaned considerably on episcopal synods, significantly reconfiguring the preparation for and conduct of those synods so as to dramatically expand participation beyond the episcopate. He has enhanced processes of consultation and created a space for honest discussion and even disagreement among participants. Many of these changes were codified in the 2018 apostolic constitution, *Episcopalis Communio*.¹⁷

15. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Antiquum Ministerium* (May 10, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html.

16. Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam* (August 15, 1972), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19720815_ministeria-quaedam.html.

17. Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (September 15, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.

Finally, the pope's commitment to the transformation of ecclesial relationships within a synodal church has led him to a dramatic reform of the Roman curia codified in his apostolic constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*. For over four centuries the Roman curia has been a substantial force for sustaining a fundamentally monarchical papacy. The pope's reforms have the potential to considerably shift our church from a monarchical papacy to a genuine synodal church. He writes, "the Roman Curia is not set between the Pope and the Bishops, but is at the service of both, according to the modalities proper to the nature of each."¹⁸ The prospects for substantive reform were advanced considerably by his determination that the power of governance may be exercised by the laity in virtue of a canonical mission. Now, in addition to being members of curial dicasteries, lay men and women can actually lead them.

These structural reforms mark vital if still partial moves toward a comprehensively reconfigured church, but clearly there is much more to be done. Pope Francis has invoked a much-overlooked medieval maxim: "*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*" (what touches all must be approved by all).¹⁹ Yet, in spite of his reforms, we remain far from making that ecclesial axiom a reality in our church today.

A Synodal Church Is Missionary

A second feature of the pope's vision for a synodal church lies in the church's missionary nature. The ecclesial transformation of relationships that we have just considered focused primarily on the church's *ad intra* relations. Yet Pope Francis's commitment to synodality has a profound, centrifugal, *ad extra* dimension as well. He has been deeply influenced by the Latin American church's distinctive reception of the council, one that focused much more on the council's missionary engagement with the world.²⁰ That orientation dominated every CELAM gathering from Medellín to Aparecida. Those meetings drew inspiration from key conciliar texts like *Ad Gentes* that highlighted the church's fundamentally missionary nature.²¹ They drew as well on the eloquent opening of *Gaudium et Spes* in which the council bishops boldly asserted that nothing that was of concern to the human community "fails to raise an echo" in the church.²² A missionary church is compelled, the council taught, to critically scrutinize the "signs of the times" (GS, §4).

18. Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (March 19, 2022), quotation in §8, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-constituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html (hereafter cited as *PE*).

19. Francis, "Speech Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary."

20. For more on synodality and missionary reform, see Antonio Spadaro and Carlos María Galli, eds., *For a Missionary Reform of the Church: The Civiltà Cattolica Seminar* (New York: Paulist Press, 2017).

21. *Ad Gentes* (October 11, 1965), §2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

22. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter cited as *GS*).

At the close of the pope's fiftieth anniversary speech on the synod of bishops, he explicitly extends the horizon of synodality to the world:

A church is to be like a standard lifted up among the nations in a world which—while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration—often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which “journeys together” with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and human world for coming generations.²³

Missionary synodality demands a movement from the center to the peripheries so that the church may “go forth to everyone without exception” (*EG*, §48). It calls the church away from a safe and secure center and toward the margins, where it can bring a healing touch to the wounded of this world. Francis has famously remarked, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (*EG*, §49). We need, he insists, a church “that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone.”²⁴

Pope Francis's frequent advocacy of a “culture of encounter” represents one of his most important contributions to our consideration of the missionary nature of the church. Indeed, I would argue that, for the pope, a culture of encounter is what synodality looks like when it is transposed into a missionary key. It is a theme that has appeared consistently throughout his pontificate, beginning with *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*, §220).

Of course, this culture of encounter involves more than just meeting people where they are; it requires a critical engagement with complex sociopolitical forces that shape human society. This critical engagement is on full display in both Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on our common home, *Laudato Si'*, and his 2020 encyclical on social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*.

Papal teaching, from Pope St. John XXIII to Pope Benedict XVI, has highlighted the church's commitment to care for the integrity of creation. *Laudato Si'*, however, was the first encyclical dedicated entirely to the topic.²⁵ Although some of his critics saw this as an inappropriate foray into a matter beyond the church's competency,²⁶ for Francis, pursuing a genuine culture of encounter compels the church to engage the central challenges facing humankind, always with humility and a willingness to learn

23. Francis, “Speech Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary.”

24. Francis, “General Audience, 2 October 2013,” in *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014), 31.

25. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

26. Massimo Borghesi considers these and other criticisms in *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 131–211.

from voices outside the church. In the case of *Laudato Si'*, Francis is particularly determined to attend carefully to the contributions of the environmental and social sciences in his analysis of our current ecological crisis. This informed analysis, in turn, leads the pope to an exposition of an integral ecology grounded in “the Gospel of Creation” and a set of proposals regarding the key tasks that humankind must set for itself if it is to preserve “our common home.”

The full breadth and depth of Francis’s culture of encounter, his commitment to a missionary synodality, emerges in the pope’s encyclical on social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*.²⁷ Like *Laudato Si'*, this encyclical was inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, in this case by the encounter of Il Poverello with Sultan Malik-al-Kamil. The pope finds in this account an example of what can happen when we work to break down walls and relativize borders in order to cultivate authentic social friendship.

This remarkable encyclical offers, Paul Elie suggests, a kind of anthology of the principal themes of his pontificate.²⁸ The document has had a particular global resonance. The Nigerian theologian Stan Chu Ilo sees profound connections between the pope’s social vision and the African ethics of *ubuntu*, a conviction that personhood is always mediated and sustained in community.²⁹ The pope writes in *Fratelli Tutti* that “each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people” (*FT*, §182). Consequently, he laments the many contemporary impediments to our sense of communal belonging: consumerism and the technological paradigm, a xenophobic preoccupation with the protection of national borders, and, in particular, the dominance of neoliberal global capitalism.

At the heart of what Luciani refers to as the pope’s distinctive “pastoral geopolitics” is the conviction that a culture of encounter must forcefully challenge the globalization of neoliberal capitalism (*FT*, §§215–17).³⁰ According to Vincent Miller, this toxic manifestation of globalization poses “a profound problem for the church’s ability to be a communion of humankind in God” as it “creates a world of powerful but attenuated relationships.”³¹ The pope, too, recognizes this danger and insists the church must work to create and sustain new institutions capable of fostering genuine, fruitful, global dialogue. We must preserve a flourishing cultural diversity and genuine differences in perspective and insight that are often found in the practical wisdom of

27. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter cited as *FT*).

28. Paul Elie, “Closer Encounters,” *La Croix International* (July 16, 2022), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/closer-encounters/16400>.

29. Stan Chu Ilo, “A Culture or Encounter: The Beauty of Otherness,” *C21 Resources* (Spring/Summer 2022), 26–27.

30. Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 103–29.

31. Vincent J. Miller, “Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (March 2022): 8–24 at 16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221076556>.

indigenous local cultures. This conviction has led him to a favorite image, the polyhedron:³²

I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions. This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which “the whole is greater than the part.” The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. (*FT*, §215)

However, it is precisely this kind of dialogue that is most at risk in our contemporary cultural moment.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes:

Today, in many countries, hyperbole, extremism and polarization have become political tools. Employing a strategy of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism, in a variety of ways one denies the right of others to exist or to have an opinion. Their share of the truth and their values are rejected and, as a result, the life of society is impoverished and subjected to the hubris of the powerful. (*FT*, §15)

As far back as 2016, the pope warned of the “virus of polarization” and called for the church to be a force for healing the deep divisions in our society. This social dynamic has always been a part of human society, but its cultural potency has been dramatically enhanced with the rise of much more sophisticated social media. Francis decries our contemporary world’s cult of borders and walls and exhorts us to engage the other, not in a spirit of fear and defensiveness, but with an openness to what the stranger can reveal to us.

A Synodal Church Concentrates on the Essentials of the Christian Faith

Let us turn now to a third feature of Francis’s vision for a synodal church: his determination to focus on the essentials of the Christian faith. As the pope reminded us in his aforementioned speech on synodality, the Greek term *synodos* suggests traveling on a common journey. A synodal church will privilege the concrete life of discipleship over a preoccupation with abstract dogmatic formulations, canonical determinations, and liturgical rubrics. It will be wary of placing on its members burdens too difficult to carry and will give priority to pastoral formation.

Pace some of his critics, Pope Francis is hardly a liberal on matters of doctrine. Rather, as Clemens Sedmak has pointed out, he is committed to a “joyful orthodoxy.”³³

32. Massimo Borghese has explored the intellectual roots of the pope’s appeal to this image in Massimo Borghese, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 101–41.

33. Clemens Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor: Pope Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 140.

This joyful orthodoxy runs through what remains in many ways the Magna Carta of his papacy, his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Here we see the realization of that truly pastoral magisterium that Pope St. John XXIII called for in his influential opening address at the council, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.³⁴ No pope has more comprehensively responded to that challenge than Pope Francis.

Francis has by no means repudiated church teaching. What he rejects is what Sedmak coins an “epistemic purism” obsessed with propositional certitude.³⁵ Doctrines are not ends in themselves; they serve us when they draw us into life-giving relationship with Christ. He fears that the church’s ministers can become accustomed to preaching not the Gospel “but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options” (EG, §39). The Gospel need not “always be communicated by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content” (EG, §129). The pope is concerned that “the message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have ‘the fragrance of the Gospel’” (EG, §39). Here, as elsewhere, the pope draws substantively on conciliar teaching. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.” This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching. (EG, §36)

This pope understands well that the council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths is more than just ranking doctrines; the council wished to relate doctrine to something more basic: the Christian kerygma.³⁶ Thus, he insists that

pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a

34. Christoph Theobald and others have treated this under the rubric “the pastuality of doctrine.” Christoph Theobald, “The Theological Options of Vatican II: Seeking an ‘Internal’ Principle of Interpretation,” in “Vatican II: A Forgotten Future,” ed. Alberto Melloni and Christoph Theobald, *Concilium* 4 (2005): 87–107. See also Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Pastoral Orientation of Doctrine,” in *Go into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Thomas Rausch (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 125–40; and John O’Malley, “Reconciling Doctrine, Theology, Spirituality, and Pastoral,” in Wall and Faggioli, *Pope Francis*, 10–22.

35. Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor*, 45.

36. For a consideration of how this conciliar teaching was received in the postconciliar pontificates prior to that of Francis, see Catherine Clifford, “L’herméneutique d’un principe herméneutique: La hiérarchie des vérités,” in *L’Autorité et les autorités: L’herméneutique théologique de Vatican II*, ed. Gilles Routhier and Guy Jobin (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 69–91.

missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing. (*EG*, §35)

While the integrity of the Gospel is certainly preserved authoritatively in the church's rich dogmatic tradition, in a synodal church it is more often kept alive and enriched in the simple expressions the Gospel finds in the lived faith of ordinary believers, what the tradition has referred to as the *sensus fidelium*. Genuine orthodoxy must be, Sedmak notes, not just a "joyful orthodoxy" but "a listening orthodoxy."³⁷

One of the greatest theological influences on Pope Francis has been the *teología del pueblo* that was distinctive to Argentina.³⁸ This theology begins with careful attention to the popular religious beliefs and customs and practices of the poor.³⁹ Pope Francis has long affirmed the theological significance of *lo cotidiano*, a term that connotes the spiritual richness of ordinary, everyday human existence. We saw this celebration of a fully inculturated faith on brilliant display at the pan-Amazonian synod. For Francis, the *sensus fidelium* is identified not only or even primarily through the opinions of educated elites but through the poor and marginalized.

Perhaps the most profound example of the priority the pope gives to the essentials of the Christian faith is reflected in his pastorally sensitive, 2016 apostolic exhortation on marriage and family, *Amoris Laetitia*.⁴⁰ Often considered as a separate treatise on the sacrament of marriage, this document is in fact a profound expression of the pope's commitment to ecclesial synodality.

Francis understands that the first task of a synodal church is sympathetic listening, and he readily admits that church teaching has too often failed to take into account the concrete concerns of believers (*AL*, §36). "Concrete" is the key word here. He uses some form of it twenty times in *Amoris Laetitia*. The Christian life is not lived in the realm of pious platitudes and romanticized narratives about the sublime beauty of spiritual marriage. The document is leavened with frequent acknowledgements of some of the most pressing practical challenges facing married couples, parents, and families today: economic hardship, forced migration, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, pornography, deprivation of women's rights, technological distraction, a "culture of the ephemeral" that undermines the pursuit of authentic relationships, and even the simple exhaustion of parents. The pope understands how difficult

37. Sedmak, *A Church of the Poor*, 160.

38. For more on the *teología del pueblo*, see Juan Carlos Scannone, *Teología del pueblo: Raíces teológicas del Papa Francisco* (Maliaño: Sal Terrae, 2017).

39. For Pope Francis's commitment to inculturation, see Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, "Evangelization, Inculturation and Popular Religion," in Gaillardetz and Rausch, *Go into the Streets!*, 41–56.

40. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (hereafter cited as *AL*).

it is to live out the obligations of marriage, parenthood, and family with any degree of authenticity and integrity in the world today.

The practical wisdom our tradition offers on marriage is found, first and foremost, in the Scriptures. For Francis, the Bible has too often been reduced to a set of abstract claims about marriage and family. Instead, we must see in Scripture a concrete “source of comfort and companionship” (*AL*, §22). After a brief treatment of magisterial teaching, chapter 4 returns to the riches of our biblical heritage with a moving reflection on that staple of wedding liturgies, 1 Corinthians 13 (“love is patient, love is kind,” NABRE). At every point in this deeply moving chapter, there is an emphasis on the practical over arid dogmatism and a recognition that the church’s pastoral accompaniment must start with people where they are.

The pope’s preoccupation with the essentials of the Christian faith naturally leads to a preference for pastoral formation over mere indoctrination and rule enforcement. This pastoral formation must be the work of the entire faith community. He calls for mature married couples to mentor the newly married, and he gently invites engaged couples to put more emphasis on their spiritual and interpersonal preparation and less on the externals of wedding planning. More recently, he has written a preface to a new curial document on marriage formation, “Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life,” in which he suggests that marriage preparation be modeled on the adult catechuminate. In that preface, he calls for divorced Catholics in irregular partnerships to be more fully integrated into the life of the church.⁴¹ This concern for irregular relationships was already evident in his dramatic simplification of the church’s procedures for obtaining an annulment.⁴²

Pope Francis criticizes clergy who are too enamored with rules and a spirit of judgment and bemoans a stress on “doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues” that fails to provide practical support for people facing concrete struggles of one kind or another (*AL*, §36). At one point he admits that the church’s ministers “find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (*AL*, §37). The integrity of adult consciences has been a consistent concern of this Jesuit pope. In a 2021 letter to the superior general of the Redemptorist Order honoring the 150th anniversary of St. Alphonsus Liguori being declared a doctor of the church, the pope celebrated the listening heart of that great moral theologian. He commended St. Alphonsus for his careful attentiveness to the concrete situations of those

41. The Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, “Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life” (June 15, 2022), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/06/15/0459/00940.html>.

42. These changes can be found in two documents: *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20150815_mitis-iudex-dominus-iesus.html; and *Mitis et Misericors Iesus*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20150815_mitis-et-misericors-iesus.html.

troubled souls who came to him for counsel. The pope insisted that “by forming responsible and merciful consciences we will have an adult Church capable of responding constructively to social fragilities, in view of the kingdom of heaven.”⁴³

Returning once more to *Amoris Laetitia*, we find in chapter 8 the most comprehensive, astute, and balanced guide to the exercise of discernment in the moral life that one will find in an official church document. Although people’s marital status may fall short of the full ideal represented in official church teaching, their situation, Pope Francis insists, can still provide an occasion of grace and an opportunity to heed the call to spiritual growth. Pastors must discern “which of the various forms of exclusion currently practiced in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework, can be surmounted” (*AL*, §299). He is convinced that in at least some of these “irregular situations” a return to the eucharistic table may be pastorally justified. “It is a matter of reaching out to everyone,” he writes, “of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy. No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel” (*AL*, §297).

Amoris Laetitia is not a capitulation to moral relativism, nor does it represent a “watering down” of church teaching. This is what authentic Christian discipleship looks like when we eschew dogmatic moralism and put the Gospel in the service of the life of ordinary believers.

A final example of the pope’s emphasis on the essentials of the Christian faith over both an arid dogmatism and a rigid rubricism is evident in his commitment to the primacy of liturgical formation in the life of the church. In 2021 the pope felt compelled to issue his controversial apostolic letter *Traditionis Custodes* in order to correct certain divisive tendencies that had arisen as a consequence of Pope Benedict’s misleading assertion in *Summorum Pontificum* that the Tridentine mass and the Missal of Paul VI were two equally legitimate forms of one rite.⁴⁴ He also significantly restricted further celebrations of the preconciliar missal.

More recently, in his apostolic letter on liturgical formation, *Desiderio Desideravi*, he elaborated on why this had been necessary.⁴⁵ Although intended as an opportunity for a profound sacramental encounter with Christ, a ritual expression of the church’s own sacramentality, the liturgy has often been reduced to a battleground. The ritual power of the liturgy lies not in a false liturgical aestheticism but in a sense of genuine

43. Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori Doctor Ecclesiae” (March 23, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210323_messaggio-santalfonso.html.

44. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Traditionis Custodes* (July 16, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html.

45. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Desiderium Desideravi* (June 29, 2022), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html (hereafter cited as *DD*).

wonder at the sublime beauty of the paschal mystery as God's means of effecting our salvation through the celebration of the liturgy. He warned that the Eucharist should not be viewed according to "a ritual aesthetic which is content by only a careful exterior observance of a rite or is satisfied by a scrupulous observance of the rubrics" (*DD*, §22). Francis was not giving license to a cavalier dismissal of liturgical rubrics; rather, he was calling for a more profound eucharistic spirituality, one that might overcome divisive liturgical debates regarding competing liturgical aesthetics.

In a Synodal Church, the Authentic Exercise of Authority Will Be Guided by the Principle of Subsidiarity

Finally, we must consider the distinctive exercise of ecclesial authority that authentic synodality demands. Authentic ecclesial authority must proceed from the church's nature as a *communio ecclesiarum*, a "communion of churches." As such, synodal authority should always be exercised as a service to God's people in ways that attend to both the local and universal dimensions of the church. Pope Francis has made it clear that, if authentic church authority is to be a genuine service rather than a burden, our church must undergo a pronounced "decentralization" of church authority (*EG*, §16). Although I am sympathetic to the pope's basic commitment here, I am not convinced the term "decentralization" itself is helpful, at least from an ecclesiological perspective. Indeed, when he appeals to decentralization in his curial reform program, what he describes maps quite closely on what in Catholic social ethics is referred to as the principle of subsidiarity. Consider this passage from *Praedicate Evangelium*:

The present reform proposes, in the spirit of a "sound decentralization," to leave to the competence of Bishops the authority to resolve, in the exercise of "their proper task as teachers" and pastors, those issues with which they are familiar and that do not affect the Church's unity of doctrine, discipline and communion, always acting with that spirit of co-responsibility which is the fruit and expression of the specific *mysterium communionis* that is the Church.⁴⁶

The pope regularly employs the language of "decentralization," but if we actually look at Pope Francis's exercise of ecclesial authority, although there are pronounced decentralizing impulses in play, it is better comprehended as an ecclesial application of the principle of subsidiarity, a principle more widely associated with Catholic social teaching.

46. *PE*, II.2. That explicit appeals to ecclesial subsidiarity remain controversial, particularly in the corridors of the Vatican, is reflected in the fact that an earlier draft of this constitution made repeated references to subsidiarity, none of which appears in the final document. In spite of that lacuna, I maintain that the principle is substantively present throughout the document. For an analysis of the earlier draft, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Francis' Draft of Curial Reform Fundamentally Reimagines Vatican's Role," *NCR Online* (June 5, 2019), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/francis-draft-curial-reform-fundamentally-reimagines-vaticans-role>.

We can define the principle of subsidiarity as applied to the life of the church as follows: *the primary responsibility for the realization of the individual Christian vocation and the fulfillment of the mission of local churches lies with those individuals and local churches themselves. Only when the realization of these goals appears unattainable at the lower level and/or a local matter threatens the faith and unity of the church universal should there be intervention from higher levels of church authority.*

Pope Pius XII affirmed in 1946 that this principle, “valid for social life in all its grades,” was valid “also for the life of the church without prejudice to its hierarchical structure.”⁴⁷ One can see the principle at work at the council itself, particularly regarding the council’s empowerment of episcopal conferences regarding liturgical matters. In doing so the council bishops broke free from a stifling liturgical uniformity to affirm the church’s catholicity, a Spirit-animated unity-in-diversity. The liturgy was not to be celebrated on some ethereal plane but in a concrete place and time and with a specific people. According to the council, the church should cultivate and foster “the qualities and talents of the various races and nations.”⁴⁸ Local churches, the council encouraged, should be willing to “borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people” (*AG*, §22). This could include incorporation into the liturgy itself, when possible, of certain elements drawn from local cultures. This discernment was best undertaken at the regional and local levels of church life.

In 1967 the synod of bishops recommended that the principle guide the process for the revision of the *Code of Canon Law*. The apostolic constitution by which Pope St. John Paul II promulgated the new code, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, also acknowledged the usefulness of the principle.⁴⁹

Still, ecclesial applications of subsidiarity have not been without some controversy. For example, the principle was largely eschewed in the revised code itself. The principle came under more substantial attack at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. Some participants insisted the principle was inapplicable to the church because the church was no mere sociological reality but rather a spiritual communion and therefore not subject to the sociological rules that apply to other secular institutions.⁵⁰

47. Pope Pius XII made this statement in an address to newly created cardinals. See *AAS* 38 (1946): 144–45. He reaffirmed the ecclesial implications of the principle of subsidiarity in an address to the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate in 1957. See *AAS* 49 (1957): 926–28.

48. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), §37, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

49. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges* (January 25, 1983), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_sacrae-disciplinae-leges.html.

50. For a review of this debate, see John Burkhard, “The Interpretation and Application of Subsidiarity in Ecclesiology: An Overview of the Theological and Canonical Literature,” *Jurist* 58 (1998): 279–342; Ad Leys, *Ecclesiological Impacts of the Principle of Subsidiarity* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 113–19; Joseph Komonchak, “Subsidiarity in the Church: The State of the Question,” *Jurist* 48 (1988): 298–349 at 336–37.

In spite of this postconciliar ambivalence in some ecclesiastical circles, many eccesliologists have found the arguments posed against an ecclesial application of the principle less than compelling. After all, the church is both a human and divine reality, and though it cannot be reduced to a sociological construct, neither can the church be completely exempt from the sociological principles that describe all human institutions. To do so would mean effectively to deny the significance of the Incarnation itself. I would argue that the principle of ecclesial subsidiarity helps illuminate, in fact, the complex interplay between the universal and local dimensions of the church and between the exercise of papal primacy and ecclesial synodality.

The ambivalence toward subsidiarity exhibited by Pope Francis's predecessors was particularly evident in the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament's 2001 document on the liturgy and liturgical translations, *Liturgiam Authenticam*.⁵¹ This document shifted much of the responsibility for liturgical translations away from episcopal conferences and back to the Vatican. This revised translation process included a line-by-line Vatican assessment of all liturgical translations, often resulting in the imposition of thousands of amendments to the submitted translation. The document also called for a much stricter "fidelity" to the original Latin text. Unfortunately, the price of this stricter fidelity was often a diminishment in the texts' intelligibility and "prayability."

In September 2017, Pope Francis effectively restored the council's application of ecclesial subsidiarity to the liturgy. He issued *Magnum Principium*, a document that revised canon law by returning the principal responsibility for liturgical translations back to the episcopal conferences.⁵² It also revised some of the norms for liturgical translation that had been established in the earlier 2001 document. He expanded the earlier document's insistence on "liturgical fidelity" to include not only fidelity to the Latin text but also fidelity to the language in which the text would be translated and fidelity to the comprehension of the worshipping community.

Here we have an example of Francis's application of the first element of the principle of subsidiarity, that which preserves the relative autonomy of local churches. But many of Francis's critics have called attention to what they see as a troubling inconsistency regarding his stance toward the autonomy of local churches. They cite in particular the Vatican suspension of ordinations in the French Diocese of Fréjus-Tolone and the recent promulgation of a rescript that prohibits the creation of diocesan institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life without Vatican approval.⁵³

Again, we should recall that the principle of subsidiarity has two elements: the first grants a certain autonomy to more local levels of ecclesial life, while the second

51. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Fifth Instruction 'For the Right Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council,'" *Liturgiam Authenticam* (March 28, 2001), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html.

52. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Magnum Principium* (September 9, 2017), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>.

53. Francis, "RESCRIPTUM EX AUDIENTIA SS.MI: Rescritto del Santo Padre Francesco circa le associazioni pubbliche di fedeli in itinere" (June 15, 2022), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/06/15/0462/00950.html>.

justifies intervention by higher authority under certain circumstances. As Luca Badini Confalonieri notes:

Subsidiarity, then, does not automatically entail decentralization, as it is sometimes mistakenly asserted. Subsidiarity merely asserts that it is each decisional level's responsibility to evaluate what it can do and what it can instead only achieve through delegation and cooperation with the higher levels.⁵⁴

Thus, what appears to be an inconsistent application of the decentralization of authority could be interpreted as an entirely consistent application of ecclesial subsidiarity. Pope Francis is a fierce advocate for the legitimate autonomy of the local churches, but he is also well aware of the obligations of the pope to preserve the unity of faith and communion. Although much of his pontificate has been marked by an empowerment of local churches and their bishops, he is not afraid to act when the welfare of the whole church demands it. In the examples mentioned above, these Vatican interventions occurred only after the local authorities had proven themselves unable or unwilling to exercise appropriate oversight.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this article was to demonstrate the extent to which this ten-year pontificate represents a fresh reception of the teaching of Vatican II, a reception best comprehended through the lens of ecclesial synodality. I have argued that the pope's vision of a synodal church is evident in his commitment to the transformation of ecclesial relationships, the missionary extension of synodality in a culture of encounter, the call for our church to focus more on the essentials of the Christian faith, and the authentic exercise of ecclesial authority in accord with the principle of subsidiarity.

I have not considered a number of more ecclesiological problematic features of this pontificate, principal among which would be the pope's more checkered record in responding to the clerical sexual abuse crisis and the glacial pace with which the full inclusion of women into all levels of church decision-making is proceeding. Still, we are not, I hope, at the end of this remarkable pontificate. There may be more surprises in store. Regardless of what the future holds for this pontificate, the work to become a more synodal church pertains not just to this pope but to the entire people of God.

ORCID iD

Richard R. Gaillardetz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7450-7352>

Author Biography

Richard R. Gaillardetz is the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College. He is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and the author of the popular text *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Liturgical Press, 2018).

54. Luca Badini Confalonieri, *Democracy in the Christian Church: An Historical, Theological and Political Case* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 146.